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SEEKING RELIEF FROM NEGATIVE EMOTIONS: CUSTOMER REVENGE AS A SELF-CONTROL CONFLICT

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Keywords: customer revenge, emotion regulation, self-control conflict, goal progress, goal commitment.

Description: This research examines customer revenge as a conflict between emotion regulation and self-control goals.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research Question

Customer revenge encompasses a number of harmful actions available to customers to punish the firm which may be direct (i.e. aggression and vindictive complaining) or indirect (i.e. negative word-of-mouth and third-party complaining). Past research has suggested that customer revenge can be undertaken in the service of emotion regulation goals. Catharsis theory holds that individuals achieve emotional cleansing when they externalize their emotions by engaging in revengeful behaviours. Individuals may have internalized beliefs about the cathartic properties of revenge and engage in the various customer revengeful behaviours because they expect to ameliorate their negative emotions (Hypothesis 1).

Rather than a single goal, individuals usually simultaneously hold multiple conflicting goals. Customer revenge poses a self-control dilemma between emotion regulation goals (the desire to immediately seek emotional relief) and self-control goals (the desire to restrain aggressive

impulses). Consequently, accessibility of these two goals will differentially impact consumer revenge (Hypothesis 2).

However, goal attainment usually requires several actions over time. In sequential behaviours, individuals' inferences about an initial goal-related action influence subsequent pursuit of or disengagement from goal-congruent behaviours. Therefore, whether an initial customer action towards the emotion regulation goal is interpreted as goal commitment or goal-progress will influence subsequent revengeful behaviours (Hypothesis 3).

Method and Data

Three scenario-based experimental designs were employed. Study 1 tested H1. Ninety nine participants participated in a 2 (mood change beliefs: present vs control) one factor design. After reading the service failure scenario, participants in the mood-change beliefs condition were led to believe that at the end of the experiment they will feel good by engaging in a happy memory recall study while the control group received no such instructions.

Study 2 tested H2. Ninety participants were recruited to a 3 (goal priming: control vs emotion regulation vs self-control) one factor design. Participants in the treatment conditions initially received the goal priming task where the emotion regulation or self-control goal were primed. All participants then read the service failure scenario.

Study 3 tested H3. Ninety one university students participated in a 3 (goal focus: control vs goal commitment vs goal progress) one factor design. After reading the scenario, participants were asked to write about their thoughts and feelings about the service failure incident. Participants in the goal commitment condition were asked about their commitment towards the emotion regulation goal while in the goal progress they were asked about their progress towards the emotion regulation goal.

Summary of Findings

Findings from study 1 indicate that individuals in the happy memory recall condition engaged in less vindictive complaining ($F(1,97)=7.26, p<.05$), less NWOM ($F(1,97)=2.82, p<.10$), less third-party complaining ($F(1,97)=6.72, p<.05$), but no less aggression ($F(1,97)=0.71, p>.10$) than the control group.

Study 2 demonstrated that participants in the self-control goal condition engaged in less aggression ($M=3.28$) than participants in the emotion regulation goal ($M=4.26; p<.05$) and the control groups ($M=4.09; p<.07$) as well as less vindictive complaining ($M=4.31$) compared to the emotion regulation goal ($M=5.67; p<.05$) and the control groups ($M=5.77; p<.05$). However, there were no significant differences between the groups for NWOM and third-party complaining.

Finally, results from study 3 suggest that participants in the goal commitment condition engaged in more aggression ($M_{\text{commitment}}=4.11$) than in the goal progress ($M_{\text{progress}}=2.72; p<.05$) and control groups ($M_{\text{control}}=3.19; p<.05$). This effect approached significance for vindictive complaining ($M_{\text{commitment}}=5.45$ vs $M_{\text{progress}}=4.24$ vs $M_{\text{control}}=4.53; F(2,88)=2.54, p<.09$) and third-party complaining ($M_{\text{commitment}}=7.41$ vs $M_{\text{progress}}=6.13$ vs $M_{\text{control}}=6.45; F(2,88)=2.57, p<.09$). However, there was no significant difference for NWOM.

Key Contributions

This research has important theoretical and practical implications. To our knowledge, this is the first study to address the emotion regulatory properties of customer revenge and to demonstrate that all the revengeful acts, except for aggression, serve emotion regulation goals where individuals seek to ameliorate their negative emotions. Moreover, this research is the first to examine customer revenge as a conflict between emotion regulation and self-control goals. Findings from the second study indicate that when individuals have an accessible self-

control goal they engage in less direct revenge but no less indirect revenge than individuals in the emotion regulation goal. Finally, it investigates how an initial goal-related action results in subsequent pursuit of or disengagement from revengeful behaviours and indicates that when an initial action towards the goal of emotion regulation is interpreted as goal commitment individuals subsequently engaged in more revengeful behaviours than when the same action was interpreted as goal progress. This finding held true for aggression, vindictive complaining and third-party complaining but not for NWOM behaviour.

Findings from this research suggest that firms can prevent customer revengeful behaviours by setting in place venting outlets where customers are given the opportunity to voice and express their negative emotions.

References are available upon request.